



Tuesday, July 23, 2013



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Former Public Notary In New Mexico Driver's License Fraud Ring Pleads To 47 Felonies

Four Others Involved in \$30,000 Per Month Fraud Ring Plead Guilty to Multiple Counts of Conspiracy to Commit Fraud

CLOVIS – A former public notary who was part of a criminal enterprise that fraudulently obtained hundreds of New Mexico driver's licenses for illegal foreign nationals living outside the State pleaded guilty on Monday to 47 felony charges.

Veronica Diaz, AKA Veronica Lara, 38, of Portales, pleaded guilty to 12 counts of forgery, 32 counts of conspiracy to alteration or forgery of a driver's license, and three counts of false evidence of title or registration. Ninth Judicial District Court Judge Drew Tatum accepted the plea and sentenced her to 70 years in the Department of Corrections, but then suspended the entire sentence and placed her on 5 years of supervised probation. Diaz, along with others, agreed to testify against the ring leaders of this scheme who remain on the run and are considered dangerous.

Diaz worked as a public notary signing false affidavits to illegally obtain New Mexico driver's licenses for foreign nationals from Mexico, El Salvador, Brazil, Guatemala, Uruguay and Honduras, who are now suspected of living in Georgia, Florida, South Carolina and Illinois.

Diaz was employed by an illegal foreign national from Mexico and his family—Luis Raul Collazo-Medrano, his wife, Olivia Campos, and daughter, Viridiana Campos—who are accused of running a \$30,000 per month illegal driver's license operation that also included human traffickers and mail collectors. Warrants have been issued for arrests of Collazo-Medrano and Olivia Campos, and the two are believed to be living together.

“For a period of time Roosevelt County was a one-stop shop for foreign nationals wanting to fraudulently obtain an identity and a New Mexico driver's license. Fortunately, we were able to discover the criminal activity and put a stop to it by prosecuting several of the players in the case, but not before hundreds of New Mexico driver's licenses were illegally issued. The long term effects of an illegal operation such as this are difficult to measure because the State will never be able to truly identify who illegally obtained a New Mexico driver's license or what they plan on

doing with the fraudulent driver's license," said Ninth Judicial District Attorney Matthew Chandler. "Now our focus is on locating the ring leader of this operation and bringing him back to New Mexico to face his charges. As a result of convicting and turning each co-defendant, the State is going to be able to make a very strong case against Collazo-Medrano."

"This was a sophisticated criminal operation that took advantage of our current laws and exploited them to their fullest by fraudulently obtaining New Mexico driver's licenses to hundreds of illegal foreign nationals who do not live in our state," said Taxation and Revenue Department Secretary Demesia Padilla. "We can throw the kitchen sink at this problem and still not solve the underlying issue that our current laws attract the criminal element to New Mexico. We can only stop this problem if we repeal the existing law that allows this to happen."

In addition, the following defendants have also pleaded guilty in this case for their roles in the elaborate forgery scheme:

Veronica Rivera (AKA Veronica Vicuna), 25, of Portales: Pleaded guilty to 23 counts of conspiracy to commit altered, forged or fictitious license, and was sentenced to 42 years in prison, all suspended in favor of supervised probation, and was ordered to pay a \$1,000 fine. Rivera has agreed to testify against Collazo-Medraon and his wife.

Maria Rivas, 42, of Portales and Midland, Texas: Pleaded guilty to five counts of conspiracy to commit altered, forged or fictitious license, and three counts of false evidence title and registration. She was sentenced to 4 1/2 years in prison, all suspended in favor of probation and ordered to pay a \$1,000 fine. Rivas has agreed to testify against Collazo-Medrano and his wife.

Brenda Vicuna, 21, of Portales: Pleaded guilty to two counts of conspiracy to commit altered, forged or fictitious license, and was sentenced to three years of probation. Rivas has agreed to testify against Collazo-Medraon and his wife.

Luis Tirado, 34, of Portales: Pleaded guilty to three counts of conspiracy to commit altered, forged or fictitious license, and was sentenced to 18 month of probation and ordered to pay a \$1,000 fine.

Although investigators identified 54 cases for prosecution purposes, the ring is accused of fraudulently obtaining hundreds of New Mexico driver's licenses for illegal foreign nationals living outside the State.

The Motor Vehicle Division has cancelled all of those licenses after the ring was busted in June 2012. Investigators from the Ninth Judicial District and the Tax Fraud Investigation Division within TRD worked together to uncover the fraud ring.

According to the criminal complaint, Collazo-Medrano fraudulently used eight different addresses – four in Clovis and four in Portales – to establish residential requirements for dozens of foreign nationals between October 2009 and December 2011.

Collazo-Medrano rented some of these homes and allowed his accomplices to live for free in exchange for collecting mail, including driver's licenses mailed to those addresses from the Motor Vehicle Division. Campos helped him with collecting mail from different addresses, mailing driver's licenses to foreign nationals living in other states, setting appointments with MVD offices, and preparing fraudulent documents.

The criminal complaint says that Veronica Diaz signed false affidavits notarizing rental agreements and other documents. Diaz is also accused of not maintaining her notary log book as required by law and buying vehicle titles to establish residency for foreign nationals.

Diaz also told investigators that before the state implemented an appointment process in the summer of 2010 for foreign nationals to obtain New Mexico driver's licenses, Collazo-Medrano would bring in van loads of foreign nationals to Clovis and Portales for their driver's licenses. She admitted that her living room would, at times, be full of foreign nationals waiting for her to sign their affidavits. Eleven foreign nationals used Diaz's residential address as their own, but none live there.

In fact, of the foreign nationals who obtained their driver's licenses in connection with this fraud ring, the whereabouts of each license holder remains completely unknown, though it is clear that they do not reside at the Clovis or Portales addresses provided to MVD in order to get their license. MVD is in the process of revoking licenses issued to these individuals.

Collazo-Medrano also recruited Veronica Rivera of Portales and Maria Rivas of Portales and Midland, Texas, to transport his clients to different MVD offices, including taking them for driving tests. Both women also told investigators that they picked up Collazo-Medrano's clients from the Amarillo airport in Texas and drove them to Clovis and Portales for \$100 per customer, plus gas. Rivas also told investigators that Collazo-Medrano gave her \$500 to buy 10 car titles from a salvage yard to be used for establishing residential requirements for foreign nationals.

Collazo-Medrano also persuaded Brenda Vicuna of Portales to stay in at least two of his rental homes for free in exchange for having the lease agreement on her name and collecting mail and paying his utility bills. Jose Luis Tirado and Esteban Lopez-Mendieta forged residential affidavits for three other foreign nationals so they could obtain their driver's licenses. Investigators also discovered several foreign nationals used the same addresses as their place of residence in Clovis and Portales, but none of them lived there.

Investigators unearthed the scam when a Brazilian national living in Georgia approached MVD to inquire about the status of her driver's license. This individual had paid \$2,000 to Collazo-Medrano to bring her to New Mexico. She flew into Amarillo, Texas, where she was picked up by Collazo-Medrano and Veronica Rivera and driven to Portales. Collazo-Medrano then charged her an additional \$2,000 for residential and other documents, and was assisted by Veronica Diaz in preparing her paperwork for the driver's license.

However, MVD stopped the issuance of the driver's license for this Brazilian national from Georgia because of potential fraud, as several other foreign nationals had also been using the same residential address in Portales. The woman told investigators that she demanded her money back from Collazo-Medrano, who reportedly told her he didn't "need her money," as he was "making

\$30,000 a month assisting other foreign nationals” in fraudulently obtaining New Mexico driver’s licenses.

Collazo-Medrano faces more than 58 years in prison if convicted on all counts as charged.

Anyone with information on Collazo-Medrano's whereabouts is encouraged to call the Ninth Judicial District Attorney's Office at 575-769-2246.

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